

Australian warehouse workers face police attacks

Erika Zimmer, Maria Esposito
17 July 1998



David Holdings storemen picketing in Sydney

At least 51 workers have been sacked for picketing in a dispute marked by increasingly violent confrontations between striking storemen, police and scabs in Canberra and Sydney. Last week more than 400 workers employed by Davids Holdings went on strike as negotiations between the union and the company over a new agreement broke down.

The company is carrying through a major restructure following its takeover by South Africa's Metro Cash & Carry in April. Metro is facing financial disaster with the collapse of its share prices in both South Africa and Australia. Since Metro acquired 78 per cent of Davids for \$385 million its share price has fallen from 550 rand to 355 rand. Davids shares have plunged from \$1.10 to just 44 cents. The company is now attempting to sell-off its Jewel supermarket chain, with an expected 80 percent loss on its original investment, and slash costs in its warehouse operations.

Despite eight months of talks between the National Union of Workers and the company, no deal has been reached to replace an enterprise agreement that expired late last year. The company rejected a 16 percent wage increase over two years and demanded that workers accept sweeping changes, including longer working hours, cuts to penalty rates and leave entitlements and a doubling of the casual workforce from 15 percent to 30 percent.

When workers walked out last week; the company hardened its position. Since then the union has reduced the pay claim to 5 percent over one year but the company has offered only 3 percent with trade-offs. The company rejected a union offer of a return to work without any pay rise at all.

A heavy police presence has marked the dispute from the start. Large contingents of police have escorted delivery trucks and scabs through picket lines at both Sydney sites. On the first day 60 police were on hand at the largest outlet and 41 picketers were arrested, followed by another six on Tuesday. On Wednesday this week over 70 police officers were mobilised under the direction of an assistant commissioner to clear a path through pickets, arresting another 12 workers.

Police have drawn their batons in an attempt to intimidate striking workers. They have also ignored scab cars and trucks driving in and out of the premises at high speeds. One worker whose foot was run over by a truck was told that it was his own fault. Such police operations could only be carried out with the full approval of the New South Wales state Labor government headed by Premier Bob Carr.

Davids Holdings workers spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters about the deteriorating conditions and their suspicions that the company wants to replace them all with casual labour.

Union delegate Phillip Mumby has worked at Davids Holdings for 18 years. 'The company has brought in a new system of work that is computerised to keep track of what everyone is doing. Two strikes and you're out if you can't keep up efficiency. If workers don't come up to scratch they will be sacked.'

Christina Crook has been working at the plant for over 10 years. 'The manager treats the workers very badly. The new system has seen a lot of injuries because people are pushed to meet the 100 percent. They suffer injured legs, backs and shattered ankles.'

John O'Brien said: 'Twenty years ago it was the best place to work. It was good management. In the last seven years it has gone from bad to worse. I just stay because I've got nowhere to go. They want to take our RDO (Rostered Day Off) away. They don't want to give us a wage rise. This place is a health hazard. If you report a broken rack, they do nothing. For a food place it is very dirty. They want to replace us with casual labour.'

Al Mellick is a young worker with 16 months service at Davids Holdings. 'The company is unfair, their system is unreasonable and they are not willing to talk. This could set a precedent in other companies. They want to get rid of job security and throw you out when there is no work.'

Another worker, George, expressed his anger at the political situation workers faced. 'We have a state Labor government in now. Before the elections we were told that if they won the elections they would wipe clean the Greiner (previous Liberal government) legislation. But they maintained it.'

Robert Clark works at the company's Silverwater site, which handles frozen foods. Boxes weigh from half a kilo to 18 kilos and are frozen to minus 22 degrees. Clark said: 'We've got that many compensation claims against the company, it's unbelievable. I think they want 100 percent casual. It just makes you sick. They don't give you a fair go. One casual told them he was not going to cross the picket line. They told him he was finished. One of the best pickers got a hernia. He got paid nothing for nine months.'

Many of the workers aged over 40 find it difficult to keep up with productivity targets. They are being replaced with a younger casual workforce. Workers estimated there was a turnover of 1,800 to 2,000 casuals every year. Casuals are being offered \$40 an hour to work during the strike.

While workers' attitude to the company was uniformly hostile, no criticism of NUW policies was voiced. When WSWs reporters asked why other NUW members had not been called out in support, the site delegate Gary Cripps said union leaders were prevented by industrial relations legislation from widening the dispute or even discussing such action with workers.

The record shows even before the latest industrial legislation was introduced, NUW secretary Frank Belan and the NUW leadership have always used legal restrictions as a pretext to accede to the demands of the employers for downsizing and never-ending speed-ups.

In recent years the NUW has helped impose 'award restructuring' and 'enterprise bargaining' agreements at Davids Holdings, Franklins, Coles and Woolworths that have destroyed hundreds of jobs and enforced speed-ups. Every time a dispute has broken out, the NUW has isolated the workers involved.

- In February 1991, 103 workers were sacked from Davids Sydney warehouse. The union diverted the dispute into an appeal in the Industrial Relations Commission. Two months later, Belan sent a letter to the sacked workers informing them that the union had accepted the court's ruling that they not be reinstated. Productivity was driven up by 30 percent.

- In September 1991, 400 Woolworths storemen were sacked after striking over TV surveillance cameras in the

Yennora warehouse. The NUM leadership bowed to legal action by the company and called off pickets. None of the original workforce was rehired and replacement workers had to sign individual contracts and accept a \$20 pay cut. The pick rate (the number of boxes picked up) was driven up by 50 percent.

- In April 1993, Belan and NUW official Graham Barker spent six months pushing production and stores workers at Kellogg in Botany into accepting a job-cutting and productivity agreement. At least 30 production workers lost their jobs.

- In May 1994, 800 striking Franklins workers were sacked in a dispute against the introduction of a computerised productivity system. After 100 armed police attacked the picket line at the Chullora warehouse, the union leadership stuck a deal that accepted the company's demands in return for a \$25 pay increase. Together with the NSW Labor Council, the union agreed that the company could use video footage to identify pickets accused of damaging company property.

Commenting on the significance of workers having an alternative means of communication and discussion like the Internet and the *World Socialist Web Site*, Cripps said: 'I think we need to do something like this to survive. If we don't see the warning signs now, we'll be finished. [Labor Premier] Bob Carr spoke at a statewide delegates meeting before he was elected and made many promises, so we went around supporting him. Afterwards he broke them all.'

See Also:

Australian politics in turmoil

[11 July 1998]

Bipartisan line-up against Australian dock workers

Documents reveal Labor had waterfront conspiracy

[3 July 1998]



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact